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ABSTRACT

Following a classroom observation, an audio tape was made of a supervisory conference between the principal or other supervisor and the teacher. Two analyses of the principal's conference skills were then added to the tape together with editorial comments on the analyses, and the tape was then returned to the principal. At the time of the report, twenty-three tapes from nine principals or other supervisors had been analyzed by two of thirteen analysts. When several tapes had been analyzed for the same principal with different teachers, the investigator, the two analysts, and the principal met to discuss the value of the analyses to the principal. In each case the principal said that the analyses were very useful and that it was helpful to have the two analyses rather than one. There was no evidence in any of the tapes of conflict between the principal and the teacher. The conferences lasted between nine and thirty-five minutes, and no systematic methods of data analysis were made either by the principal or the analysts. Some principals and teachers pursued objectives in the conference that they agreed on in advance; others did not. The preliminary results of the feasibility study are encouraging, and further data are being collected and analyzed to continue the study. (Author)

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A Feasibility Study for Diagnostic Analysis of Taped Supervisory Conferences

by G. Bradley Seager, Jr.

April 1975

Background of the Study

For twenty years Morris Cogan and his associates have been developing the rationale and strategies for clinical supervision, i.e., supervision based on a cycle of planning, observation, analysis, evaluation, and renewed planning by teachers and supervisors working together in a long-term relationship. Intensive work with interns, student teachers, and experienced teachers has shown that clinical supervision can contribute much to the improvement of instruction and to the professional growth of teachers, specialists, and administrators. The power and practicality of clinical supervision have been demonstrated in the field, but many school districts de-emphasize supervision and assign supervisory responsibilities to staff members who have little preparation for the complexities of clinical supervision.

Supervision is often confused with rating, perhaps because state laws require that all teachers be rated periodically and that teachers who are rated unsatisfactory be provided with resources for improving their classroom performance. Tenured teachers who receive satisfactory ratings may have little opportunity to participate in clinical supervision, because their work is seldom observed and such observations as are made may result in only perfunctory comments.

Peer supervision is not required and, in many instances, not much valued. Inservice education programs may provide opportunities for teachers to learn from one another, and team teaching or differentiated staffing could incorporate clinical supervision as a major resource for the improvement of instruction. These organizational patterns are not widespread, so it is usually only the principal or district supervisor who has the formal responsibility for classroom observations that form the basis for supervisory conferences and written reports.

By providing principals and supervisors with an analysis of audio tapes of their conferences with teachers based on classroom observations, it may be possible to help them develop and implement strategies for improving their conference skills. This study investigated the feasibility of providing this resource to principals and supervisors in the field. Some of the participating principals and supervisors were formally prepared in the concepts and skills of clinical supervision; others were not. They were all volunteers who, in turn, received permission from individual teachers with whom they worked to make an audio tape recording of a regularly scheduled conference following a classroom observation. The tapes were analyzed by graduates of or graduate students in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. The analysts vary in the extent of their formal preparation and field experience in clinical supervision and in diagnostic supervision. The analysts were selected by the investigator for their commitment to the objectives of the study, their interest and experience in supervision, and their availability at the time of the study.

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Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study was to investigate the feasibility of using analyses of taped supervisory conferences between supervisors and teachers to help the supervisors improve their skills in conferences based on classroom observations. A subsidiary objective was to prepare a team of competent analysts as resource persons in the event that there is a demonstrated need and desire for diagnostic analysis of taped supervisory conferences.

Procedures

The investigator met with representatives of the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (Allegheny County, Pennsylvania) and received assurance that, in their opinion, diagnostic analysis of taped supervisory conferences would be of considerable interest to administrators and supervisors in the school districts served by the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. Then the investigator met with individual administrators and supervisors in several school districts in which the investigator had served as a consultant. These administrators and supervisors were, themselves, committed to the concepts and skills of clinical supervision and encouraged the investigator to include them or principals with whom they worked as participants in the study. The investigator then received a faculty research grant from the School of Education, University of Pittsburgh to conduct the feasibility study with ten principals or supervisors and forty-five teachers. In the first phase of the study, which is all that is included in this report because initiation of the study was deferred for three months pending approval of the research grant, nine principals or supervisors submitted a total of twenty-three tapes for analysis, and each tape was analyzed by two members of the analysis team and edited by the investigator.

In some cases the investigator and the analysts met with the principal before any tapes were made. In this meeting the objectives and procedures of the study were explained and the principal was invited to suggest criteria for analysis of the tapes that would be useful and interesting to the principal. In a few cases the investigator met with the principal without the analysts present and later informed the analysts of the principal's suggestions for analysis of the tapes. In still other cases the principal was recruited for the study by one of the analysts, and the analyst informed the principal of the objectives and procedures of the study.

The teachers who agreed to taping the supervisory conferences included tenured and nontenured teachers, some of whom had experience in clinical supervision, as well as two student teachers. A wide variety of grade levels and subject specialties is represented on the tapes, and the tapes were made in elementary, middle, and secondary schools in southwestern Pennsylvania and southeastern Ohio. The conferences took place in March and April, 1975.

After a supervisory conference was taped by a principal or supervisor, together with some background information about the teacher, the tape was forwarded to one of the analysts, then to a second analyst, then to the investigator. Each analysis was taped as were the investigator's editorial comments. The composite tape was then duplicated and the original was returned to the principal or supervisor. The second analyst had the opportunity to hear the first analysis before adding the second analysis to the tape.

After the principal or supervisor had listened to the taped analyses and editorial comments, the investigator planned to meet with the principal and the analysts together to assess the principal's reaction to the analyses and to plan for a second round of taped conferences with, if possible, the same teachers. At the time of this report only two of these meetings have taken place. Statements by the two principals are included in the results section of this report. When both rounds of conferences and analyses have been completed, the investigator and analysts will again meet with the participating principals to assess the principal's attitude toward the diagnostic analysis of taped supervisory conferences and to evaluate the principal's progress in the development and implementation of strategies for the improvement of conference skills. The investigator will also meet with the analysts, and together they will evaluate the analysts' competences as resource persons for the diagnostic analysis of taped supervisory conferences. The investigator will then prepare a report of the outcomes of this part of the study and share this report with representatives of the Allegheny Intermediate Unit and others in the field to obtain their assessment of the feasibility of both a workshop and a continuing service to the field based on diagnostic analysis of taped supervisory conferences. These assessments will then be incorporated in the final report of the feasibility study.

Methods of Analysis of Taped Supervisory Conferences

Methods of analysis of supervisory conferences have been developed by Blumberg, Bryan, and Weller among others. Blumberg's system of content analysis was further refined by Bryan, who analyzed content by format and function. He developed eight format categories and eleven function categories and demonstrated their usefulness in a field study. Weller's system, which he calls M.O.S.A.I.C.S. (Multidimensional Observational System for the Analysis of Interactions in Clinical Supervision), is more complex and requires computer analysis of data. This system, and several others, are described in Weller's book, Verbal Communication in Instructional Supervision (Teachers College Press, 1971). Despite the availability of these systems of analysis of supervisory conferences, systematic analysis of supervisory conferences probably occurs rarely, because of the time and training necessary for it. When supervisory conferences are analyzed, it is likely that informal and subjective methods are most often used. Therefore, in the present study it seemed advisable to have two analysts for each taped conference and to have the investigator add editorial comments after the second analysis. The analysts had, at one time or another, been students in Curriculum & Supervision at the University of Pittsburgh, so they had some common background and experience in clinical supervision from which their individual styles of analysis developed.

Results

There was no evidence of conflict between the principal or supervisor and the teacher in any of the twenty-three conferences that were analyzed. There was much evidence of ritualistic behavior in many of the conferences, especially in the use of praise by the principal. The conferences were mostly about twenty minutes long, with a range from nine minutes (the principal was in a hurry to get to a meeting in another building) to thirty minutes. The

principal and teacher usually related data from the observation to issues they had discussed at other times, but they did so without reference to any systematic method of data analysis or data collection and without reference to any ongoing plan or program for the improvement of instruction or for the teacher's professional growth. This informal process of analysis and interpretation of data was accepted by the teachers, at least as far as could be determined from what they said in the conference. One principal revealed an attitude toward students that was extremely negative. He spoke of one class as comprised of "twenty little monsters," and he encouraged the teacher to use coercive techniques on the assumption that only such techniques would be effective. The teacher did not question the principal's point of view, but the analysts were sharply critical of the principal's values and the means he used to transmit those values to the teachers in each of the conferences in which he participated. One of the analysts reacted emotionally to the conference and made the statement, "I see nothing positive in this conference." The second analyst kept his emotions to himself and concentrated on the techniques by which the principal dominated the conference. This example demonstrated the value of having two analysts for each tape, because both analysts conveyed a message that was worth hearing, and it would have been difficult to combine the two types of message in a single analysis. There were many other instances in which the two analysts made complementary interpretations of the data on the tapes.

Some of the principals and supervisors who had considerable experience or course work in clinical supervision demonstrated a degree of subtlety and sophistication that was lacking entirely in those who were unfamiliar with clinical supervision. These principals and supervisors encouraged the teachers to join them in analyzing the data and invited the teachers to suggest topics for discussion in the conference. In conferences in which these principals and supervisors participated there was a fluency in the conference and a balance of participation between principal and teacher that the analysts uniformly commended. Digressions were permitted in the conference if they were consistent with the purposes of the conference, and these digressions contributed substantially to the maintenance of a climate of professional sharing. Some of these principals and supervisors established continuity between the classroom observation and other forms of interaction between them and the teachers.

The analyses of different conferences by the same analyst were more similar than the two analyses of any one conference. Each analyst displayed a personal style that was carried over from one conference to the next. Altogether there were eleven analysts who formed five analysis pairs. The eleventh analyst was a replacement for one of the analysts in one pair. Some analysts used frequency counts and percentage distributions of time for each participant as criteria for analyzing the data. No analyst used any system for organizing the data from the conference, although one analyst consistently presented his analysis as a list of positive comments followed by a list of negative comments. Two of the three women analysts chose to summarize the data from the conference without offering much interpretation of their own. The third woman analyst might be described as uncompromising. She knew the principal well and had no professional connection with the school district in which the principal is employed. Her analysis of the three tapes submitted by this principal was searching and highly organized. She raised many questions for the principal to consider and encouraged him to set more challenging objectives for himself and the teachers in future conferences. The other analyst for these tapes was a member of the principal's staff. His analysis was equally pertinent and forthright without the "surgical" quality the editor ascribed to the former analyst's techniques.

One principal was also a member of the analysis team. At the end of his conferences with the teachers he asked them for their evaluation of the conference. The teachers then recorded their evaluations on the tape, and these evaluations were highly positive. The principal then provided his own analysis of the taped conferences and related this analysis to objectives he had set for himself in the conferences. He concluded that he should (1) not be afraid of a slower pace at times during a conference; (2) not be afraid of periodic silence; (3) learn to use collected data more as background information for the conference rather than using it all directly in conversation; and (4) learn not to be afraid of natural digression if the teacher expresses a need to do so. It is curious that the phrase "not to be afraid" occurs in three of these four conclusions. After listening to an independent analysis of the first conference this principal stated that "As a result of this project this supervisor will: (1) use conference time more efficiently; (2) use data more effectively, attempting to use it for background for the conference as well as for direct conversation; (3) become more conscious of the value of his own conference initiations; (4) tape more conferences; and (5) continue the analysis process."

Between the first and second phases of the study, the investigator planned to meet with the principal and the analysts to discuss what the principal had found useful in the first round of analyses and to learn what the principal's suggestions might be for the second round of analysis. Then the principal would make a second round of observations and taped conferences with the same teachers and these tapes would also be analyzed by the same analysts as far as possible. At the time of this report only one of these meetings has occurred. It will be reported here in some detail. The principal noted that it had been several years since anyone had given him feedback on a teacher conference and he found both sets of analyses extremely useful. He said that he had already been aware of some points made in the analyses, such as the comment that he made extensive use of positive reinforcement. Nevertheless, he was glad to have these points confirmed by the analysts. He gave examples of inferences he had been unaware of--that his approach was paternal and that in one conference he and the teacher were working from different agendas. He said he wanted to listen to the conferences again to see whether he agreed completely with the analyses. He repeated, "I really think it's extremely useful--very, very useful." He commented that at first he agreed without much enthusiasm to participate in the study as a favor to the investigator, but "Now I would take any teacher who is available, because I found it very, very useful." He spoke of extending the diagnostic analysis of taped supervisory conferences to the whole district and mentioned that he is the chairperson of the district's committee on teacher evaluation. He was asked whether it would be important to him to have two analyses of each tape in the second round of the study, and he replied that he would prefer to have both analysts continue. He invited the analysts in round two to look for whether his questions of the teacher are focused and whether he is cooperating with the teacher in working toward objectives that are important to the teacher. Before the first round he had asked the analysts, among other things, to focus on (1) "How objective am I in evaluating results achieved against results expected? What alternate techniques could be used? (2) How effective am I in drawing out the teacher's observations of the students' reactions? (3) Amount of teacher talk vs. principal talk (4) Do my attitudes, questions, etc., inspire fear or threaten the teacher?" The analysts had implied in their comments on the tapes that his questions of teachers in the first round were global rather than specific, and his suggestions for the analysts are related to this theme.

Formative Evaluation

Because more than half of the data for this feasibility study remain to be collected and analyzed at the time of this report, any evaluation at this time must be formative rather than summative. The results so far are encouraging in two respects: first, some principals and supervisors have demonstrated their concern for the quality of their conference techniques and have been willing to devote some of their energy and time to exploring ways of increasing their conference skills; second, the principals and supervisors who have experience or course work in clinical supervision have shown that they can apply what they have learned in their daily work. The tapes also show that the teachers who agreed to have their conferences taped and analyzed welcomed the opportunity to receive genuine help from principals and supervisors and appreciated that help when it was forthcoming. These partial and preliminary results suggest that clinical and diagnostic supervision have a significant contribution to make to the improvement of instruction and to the professional growth of teachers, administrators, and supervisors.

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